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ABSTRACT

Reactions to college and university retrenchment (a significant decline in financial resources that results in a reduction in permanent staff and/or elimination of existing programs) and political influences are considered. Responses to retrenchment may include the following: protective reactions by individual faculty members and reduced collegiality due to protective fences established by departments and disciplines, and a restriction of opportunities for newer and younger faculty members. Ways in which retrenchment may have positive outcomes include pressure for non-producing individuals and marginal programs to improve. The central issue in retrenchment is resource allocation. External politics during a period of retrenchment is especially important, since most universities are state-funded and the loss of federal dollars jeopardizes funded projects, research teams, and support systems. The loss of government tax dollars may also result in restricted enrollments, elimination of vital programs, and reduced educational opportunities for young people. The creation of strong retrenchment committees that work directly for the solution of retrenchment problems is recommended. Individually and collectively, university faculty and administrators must more effectively disseminate information about the university and its programs. (SW)

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THE POLITICS OF RETRENCHMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Retrenchment is no longer an abstract term in academic vocabulary. It is a hard reality for practically all members of the university community. Lost jobs and displaced programs are now recounted in the general press as well as professional publications. The force of retrenchment is not only generating tremors of fear and uncertainty, it is also beginning to generate substantial changes in the character, direction and momentum of higher education.

Higher educaton has enjoyed an extended period of growth and prosperity from World War II through the 1970's. It has been a growth industry. Two baby booms and an ever increasing ground-swell of college aged enrollments have fueled long-term institutional growth. National economic prosperity, an open job market for college graduates, and a general view of the college degree as a vehicle for lifetime security and affluence have all underwritten a three decade period of unprecedented growth in higher education.

The realities of the 1980's, however, have created the beginning of what is likely to be a new era for American higher education. The fact that growth has stagnated and decline has begun is documented widely. Faculty lay-offs, a severely constricted job market and loss of federal funding have become indicators not only of severe current problems, but of major changes in the direction of higher education during the next decade and even beyond.

Among the foremost elements in higher education's declining fortunes is the loss of traditional aged students due to demographic changes that have been predicted for years. That coupled with a major national recession, and a strong conservative movement which has swept through the federal government have all contributed heavily to what is now generally known as retrenchment.

RETRENCHMENT

Retrenchment is variously defined, but is usually accepted to mean a significant decline in financial resources which results in a reduction in permanent staff and/or elimination of existing programs.

When retrenchment occurs, the final evidence may be a declaration by the board of regents, or a notice of termination sent to permanent staff. Before this crisis situation occurs, however, there is typically a rather extended period of belt-tightening. One of the first things discovered by

retrenchment committees and other groups addressing the problem is how thin the line is that exists between prosperity and decline.

REACTIONS TO RETRENCHMENT

Austerity and a retrenchment mentality can generate a number of changes on campus. Among the responses to retrenchment may be some or all of the following:

1) The lessening of university-wide collegiality due to protective fences established by departments and disciplines.

2) Protective reactions by individual faculty members as their positions, assignments and perquisities are threatened.

3) The development of a multi-tiered professorate: tenure-holders, tenure-track contenders, and a growing number of part-time and ancilliary academics who carry major teaching and research responsibilities, but who will never have the traditional rewards of academic service, ie. tenure, collegial participation in university governance, job security, presitige of an academic identity, etc.

4) Restriction of opportunities for newer, younger faculty members. Reduced turn-over in senior ranks produces less mobility as people with jobs become more security conscious.

The list above highlights some of the most obvious and negative features of retrenchment. A few positive reactions include:

1) Increased scruitiny within the university of marginal programs and non-productive activities.

2) Direct and in-direct pressure on non-producing individuals to increase output.

3) Better allocation of existing resources to productive areas of the university.

4) Greater attention given to the recruitment and retention of students.

5) Greater attention given to the educational needs of adult and non-traditional students.

6) Attention shifted by professors from self-centered interests to problems of general concern such as university politics and institutional futures. More and more professors are motivated to learn about the university and to become interested in its

welfare rather than leaving political concerns to administrators and a handful of faculty activists.

In looking at the long-term impact of retrenchment, certain effects are inevitable. For some individuals, retrenchment will mean that certain career lines will be closed and opportunities denied. For others in more secure positions, the result will be making do with less and less.

POLITICS OF RETRENCHMENT

Decisions must always be made as institutions chart their futures. The collegial structure of most colleges and universities presumes substantial faculty involvement in this process. Traditionally, boards of regents and executive administration have found merit in using the collegial model of decision-making. This model, in periods of stress, however can be cumbersome. In these situations, normal procedures may be overridden, policies suspended or changed, and preemptory responses to crises made. Several instances of this have been seen during the last several months in states where major financial exigency has been felt. The states of Washington and Oregon have been hit very hard by the decline of the housing industry. Faculty cut-backs, lay-offs and early retirements have been the order of the day. Tenure has been suspended in Idaho. Illinois, Michigan, Ohio and many other Mid-west states report heavy reductions in faculty staffing. Salary increases have been foregone in a number of states, the most recent being California where zero dollars have been budgeted for salary increases in 1982-83.

To change from a growth mentality to one of austerity and retrenchment has been doubly difficult for higher education. Austerity is rather unpleasant by its very nature. Beyond this, however, higher education has had little opportunity to experience adversity during the last thirty years.

Obviously, a fundamental change in direction by higher education from growth to retrenchment is going to generate not only policy differences, but also substantive changes in program priorities and in the allocation of diminishing resources. The politics of this process then relates to the following questions: 1) What will the changes be?; and 2) Who will make them?

It is clear that the central issue in retrenchment is resource allocation, how much is available, who makes the decisions and sets the priorities, and finally what will be the impact on facultly and staff, students, and society at large. Without adequate resources, program and staffing changes are inevitable. The central questions from faculty perspective then becomes whose jobs and which programs.

EXTERNAL POLITICS

External politics during a period of re'renchment is even more important than during more conventional times. And in more conventional times, external politics are all important. Most of the nation's universities are state funded. Student driven enrollment formulas generate operating resources. Legislative generosity or the lack of it is the centerpiece of academic plannig and budgeting.

Severe losses of tax revenue in many states have produced heavy cuts in state spending. Colleges and universities are a major consumers of state appropriations. A loss of tax revenue means reduced state appropriations. Reductions must inevitably follow at the institutional level.

Politics at the state level now frequently feature survival issues as educational lobbyists attempt to preserve their programs and even their institutions. Even though academe has long viewed itself rather removed from the world of politics, current realities demonstrate the error of this thinking.

State and federal politics are basic to the continuing fortunes of the university. During periods of retrenchment, this is even more true. The loss of federal dollars not only jeapordizes funded projects, it also dismembers research teams and support systems which may never be recovered. At a time when America must maintain its competitiveness in the world marketplace and protect its well-being through military development, cut-backs in research dollars may be a poor investment indeed.

The loss of both federal and state tax dollars may also result in restricted enrollments, elimination of vital programs, and the constriction of educational opportunities for many college aged youngsters. Students whose futures are at risk as the results of these cut-backs may never understand the politics nor the economics which have affected their lives, but nevertheless will be profoundly affected by the changes in the fortunes of higher education.

RESPONSE

One certainty with retrechment is while responses and adjustments must be made, the mainstream activities of the university must continue. The difficulty in this process, however, is in determining what is essential and what is not. This process generally deterioriates into a political quagmire that is virtually unmanageable in a conventional atmosphere of academic collegiality and open debate. Too many vested interests

exist, and closure takes far too long when decisions must be made in a few weeks or months.

One functional solution is the creation of strong retrenchment committee composed of well respected members of the academic community. This committee must be vested with plenary powers to make hard decisions. This body should work directly with executive administration in the development of solutions to retrenchment problems. Decisions must be made and it is far better that these be made by a representive body with diversified interests than unilaterally by executive administration under pressures of expediency and political duress. It is essential that both faculty and administrative interests be shared during retrenchment deliberations.

At the state and federal level, the academic community must exercise its political potential much more effectively than in the past. Individually and collectively, university faculty and administrators must build more effective means of disseminating information about the university and its programs. More attention must be given to interactions with legislators and the outer community. Isolation can spell disaster in times where scarce resources are being allocated by a political process in state legislative councils.

In summary, retrenchment is bringing substantial changes not only in the fortunes of higher education, but it is also changing the thinking and many of the practices in the university. The university will survive in spite of difficult times. It, however, is the responsibiltiy of those who know it best, those whose careers and lives are vested in the university to take a stronger role as the institution charts its way through troubled waters.

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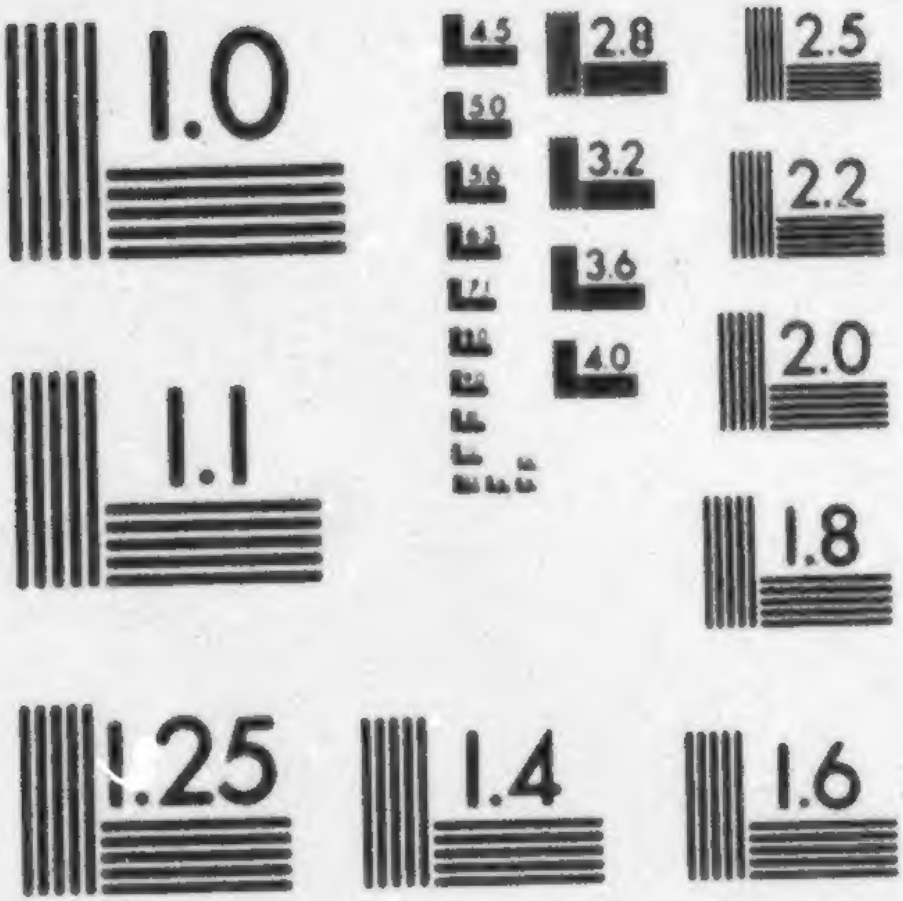

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